

Lafayette Historical Society

P.O. Box 133

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President: Shirley Thomson

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Newsletter Editor: Nancy Midwood

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Oakland Bay Bridge completed fifty years of service this year, the Golden Gate Bridge will reach fifty next year, and the Caldecott Tunnel is beginning its fiftieth year of service this week. The Contra Costa County Historical Society is hosting a luncheon on Saturday, December 6, to commemorate the tunnel's opening.

The bridge and tunnel projects were, of course, in the process long before 1936. Discussion of an Alameda-Contra Costa tunnel, for instance, was already taking place in 1860. According to J. F. W. Sohst, an early tunnel proponent, opposition to the building of a tunnel "sometimes arose where it was least expected." For instance, "A mass meeting at Lafayette in March of 1898 was a blow," he said. "Land owners, large and small, admitted that land would improve in value but feared that it would be held so high in price that no one would want to buy—and the project would therefore be detrimental to progress."

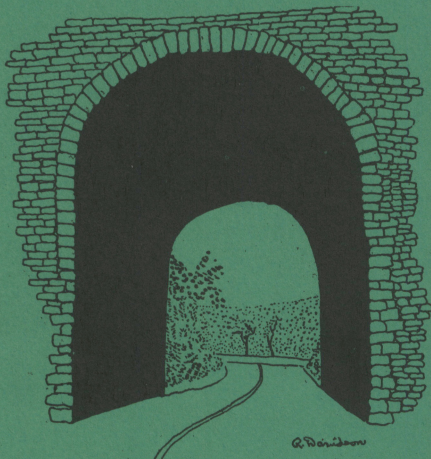
Accounts in the *Martinez Gazette* and the *Walnut Creek Courier-Journal* in 1936 and 1937 were optimistic; many fairly glowed with anticipation—although there was concern for the growing number of auto accidents on local roads.

On September 8, 1936, the *Gazette* reported that "Walnut Creek has 8100 cars a day." In June, folks in Lafayette had noted the need to improve local conditions since "vehicles were speeding at a dangerous rate through the town." And in the same June issue of the *Courier-Journal*: "Lafayette building sites are selling fast. . . . Good homes are making Brook Street one of the selective residential districts."

Along with updates on King Edward's romance, the Spanish civil war, the Roosevelt-Landon presidential election, and even rumors that Hitler might be intending to retire in favor of Goering, the papers reported many significant local events which added lustre to the name of Progress. In June the Lafayette Business Men's Association was formed. The Lafayette Garden Club held its first annual flower show that year, the Horse Show Association was formed, and a new local high school district was set up.

A different sort of local story was reported in the December 17, 1936, *Courier-Journal*. It related the discovery of gold. "Four or five pieces of gold were found in the gizzard of a chicken killed by S. W. Parsons of Alamo Monday. The fowl was raised from a baby chick by the Parsons family and was allowed to run the grounds at will. Upon examination of the gold by a Walnut Creek jeweler it was determined the chick had swallowed a gold crown from a tooth."

Gold or no, things were looking up. MERRY CHRISTMAS!



Shirley

Lafayette pioneer descendant dies



Alice McNeil in 1917

One of the last links with Lafayette's past, Alice McNeil Russi, died September 15 at Ygnacio Valley Convalescent Hospital, Walnut Creek, she had been in ill health for some time.

The daughter of Robert Elam McNeil and Gertrude Thomson, owners of Lafayette's Pioneer Store from 1902 to 1935, she was raised in the historic building. It was built by the town's first schoolmaster, Benjamin Shreve, as a store and post office in the early 1860s and is one of three Points of Historical Interest on Plaza Way.

When she married Theodore Russi of Concord, two Contra Costa pioneer families were united. Mr. Russi's father, George, purchased the Pacheco Flour Mill in 1881, and it remained in the Russi family for almost 70 years. Mrs. Russi was a resident of Concord for many years and moved to Rossmoor after her husband's death.

A member of the original Lafayette Historical Committee of the Friends of the Lafayette Library, the forerunner of the Lafayette Historical Society, she was a life member of the Lafayette organization and also a member of the Contra Costa County Historical Society.

Mrs. Russi was always generous in sharing pictures from her family albums and information concerning the early days of Lafayette. She donated many photos, clippings, and mementoes from those pioneer times and was always available to answer questions about the city in times gone by. Many of the photos in *Lafayette: A Pictorial History* and in the recently published *History of Concord, Its Progress and Promise* are from her collection.

In 1971, Mrs. Russi officiated at a formal plaquing of two deodor pines which her parents had planted many years ago in front of the Lafayette Methodist Church. A display of her family's photos and selected possessions was one of the Lafayette Historical Society exhibits at the former Lafayette Savings and Loan Association.

Mrs. Russi's roots go back to Lafayette's earliest days. Her grandmother, Elizabeth Jane Allen, was born near the present city of Reno while the Allens were en route from Missouri to California. Members of the overland party of Elam Brown, the founder of Lafayette, the Allens experienced hardship and tragedy on the journey. The father, Andrew Allen, had been left at Fort Hall in ill health. The mother, Elizabeth—Mrs. Russi's great grandmother, died shortly after Elizabeth Jane's birth and was buried at the party's campsite.

Elam Brown and his wife brought the newborn child to California and eventually to the town that was to become Lafayette. They

cared for her until her father recovered his health and rejoined the family.

In 1863, Elizabeth Jane married William McNeil, a native of Northern Ireland. The couple had three children, the youngest being Robert, who was born on July 19, 1968. The young man began life in Lafayette as a farmer in the Happy Valley area and was married to Gertrude Thomson in 1890. Mrs. Russi was one of their five children.

During the time the McNeils owned the Pioneer Store, it was the center of Lafayette's community life and boasted of the first and only phone in town for many years.

Memorial services for Mrs. Russi were held September 22 at the First Christian Church of Concord, of which she was a member. Private burial service followed at Oakmont Memorial Park in Lafayette.

Surviving Mrs. Russi are a cousin and several nieces and nephews.

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ORAL HISTORY MOVES UP THE TECHNOLOGY TRAIL

Oral history's newest addition is a dynamic videotaped interview of Ken Brown, of the Elam Brown family, by Ollie Hamlin.

Our thanks to Betty Wells for her professional quality recording and to Ollie for his fine job as an on-camera interviewer—a great first effort for all three! Both transcript and video are on file in our archives.



LAFAYETTE CONSTITUTIONAL BICENTENNIAL COMMISSION

The Constitutional Bicentennial Commission, headed by Chief Justice Warren Burger, has a local representative organization in Lafayette, headed by Merv Hasselman.

To commemorate the events of December 1786-1787, the local commission will be seeking donations for contest prize monies and for a permanent memorial. The commission will sponsor essay contests, oratory and debates on the constitution in the Lafayette schools. The commission also plans to establish a permanent memorial—possibly in the form of a gazebo—at the junction of Mount Diablo Boulevard and Golden Gate Way.

The Lafayette Historical Society has voted to affiliate with the local commission to assist in furthering their goals. Ray Peters is the LHS representative to the commission.

OLD BETSY PROVIDES HALLOWEEN TREATS

Lafayette's 1919 fire engine made a special appearance at Burton Valley School to give rides to children attending the PTA's Halloween party. Old Betsy also participated in the annual Concours de Elegance and the Lafayesta parade.

WINTER PROGRAM SCHEDULED FOR FEBRUARY 10

LHS's winter program will feature a speaker recounting the story of the building of the Golden Gate Bridge. Details of the event being arranged by Elizabeth Johnston will be announced in January.

by Ray Peters

With the decline of the Roman Empire during the Dark Ages, interest in gazebos also declined in that part of the world; however, they flourished in the East. Persian history tells of precious metals decorating marble columns, and of seats of gold. Marco Polo described beautifully tiled garden houses during the Sung period (690-1280), from which Japan imported its famous teahouse.

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington all had interests in gazebos. While Jefferson did not build one, he had written about them and designed one for James Madison. George Washington had a small octagonal summerhouse at Mount Vernon.

By early 1900, gazebos had lost their popularity—probably because of the more practical porch that was attached directly to the house. However, since it was intended chiefly as an ornamental device rather than a practical one, the gazebo began making a comeback in better gardens by 1930.

Tastes change, however. The nation, possibly reminded of its heritage by a series of bicentennial celebrations, is once again building gazebos.

Long considered a monument to the contemplative life and nostalgic romance of the past, the gazebo is back.

Celebrate the festive holiday season in elegant Victorian style. The California Historical Society Docent Association presents the annual Tea-Time Concert Series at the 1896 Whittier Mansion, 2090 Jackson Street on December 7 and 14.

Sunday, December 14, 1986, 4-5 pm.

*A classical chamber concert of traditional and Christmas music,
performed by artists from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.*

Refreshments will be served (3-4 pm), during which time guests may informally tour the splendidly decorated Whittier Mansion. Tickets are \$8; reservations recommended. Call 567-1848 for information.

HOMES AND GARDENS OF ENGLAND AND WALES

December 15, 7:30-9:00 pm

CHS San Francisco Headquarters

Come to the Whittier Mansion for an intimate evening with John Bryon, former Director of the Strybing Arboretum in San Francisco and Garden Editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for a slide-enhanced introduction to the "Great Homes and Gardens of England and Wales."

Mr. Bryon's talk will feature highlights of the upcoming May 9-24, 1987, travel program of the same name, which he will lead, and which was created especially for the California Historical Society and the Nevada Historical Society. Highlights of the evening's talk and the actual trip will include Hampton Court; Windsor Castle; St. James Park; Haddon Hall, a beautiful manor; Lyme Park; Bodnant Gardens, considered one of the finest gardens in Wales; and Wells Cathedral.



ARCHIVES ACQUISITIONS

LHS's Sandy Kimball edited *The History of Concord, Its Progress and Promise* published by the Concord Historical Society (P.O. Box 404, Concord, CA 94522). The book sells for \$31.90, including tax, at the Concord Chamber of Commerce. The Lafayette Historical Society has obtained a copy for the file at the city library.

The Road to Excellence has also been acquired for the Society's collection. This 40-page booklet is a history of the high school district written by Peggy Mahler, retired high school teacher in the Acalanes School District, who made extensive use of our archives to research this history.

George Emanuels's new book, *Contra Costa County: An Illustrated History*, uses narrative and nearly 250 photographs to provide a broad view of the history of the county and 33 of its communities (\$27.50).

HIGHLIGHTS OF MAYBECK TOUR

Thirty-six participants took advantage of the LHS-sponsored opportunity to visit Maybeck buildings in Berkeley on October 18.

A docent tour was conducted for the group at the First Church, Scientist. At the Town and Gown Club, Elizabeth Thompson, A.I.A., architect and local historian, spoke informally with members. Kenneth Cardwell, author of *Bernard Maybeck, Artisan, Architect, Artist*, spoke to members and answered their questions at the concert pianist Alma Kennedy's studio, designed in 1923. This home, which contains some original Maybeck designed benches and dining room furniture, was a most enjoyable setting for the brown bag luncheon, graciously hosted by Anne Marselis, realtor for Latham Co.

The enthusiasm generated by this event arranged by Elizabeth Johnston has resulted in the following guide to other Maybeck homes in Berkeley, prepared by Elizabeth Thompson for interested members.

MAYBECK HOUSES IN THE BERKELEY HILLS

by Elizabeth Thompson, A.I.A.

1537 Euclid (1923)

Corner of Buena Vista. Alma Schmidts Kennedy-Nixon houses.

2701 Buena Vista (1925)

Above La Loma (several blocks uphill from Euclid Avenue), the "sack house" which Maybeck designed as a simple and low cost way of building--dipping old sacks in a concrete mix and hanging them on wire to make a wall.

2704 Buena Vista (1916)

A delightful example of Maybeck's design which escaped the 1923 fire--while Maybeck's own house, across the street, was burned to the ground.

2733 Buena Vista (1916)

The Tufts house.

2751 Buena Vista (1916)

The Stiehl house, also known as the Wallen Maybeck house.

2800 Buena Vista (1916)

The Temple of the Winds. Not designed by Maybeck but much influenced by his ideas and those of the owners, the Boyntons, who believed in the simple life, lived the natural way.

1515 La Loma (1916)

The Lawson house. Built for Andrew Lawson; designed by Maybeck. Lawson was a professor of engineering and an expert on seismic forces, and he and Maybeck worked on the design of this concrete house to withstand earthquake forces--and it stood through the fire also.

1772 LeRoy (1916)

The Dibble-Semrau studio. Look down from the street to find this, both studio and residence.

2286 Cedar Street (1916)

The Hillside Club. Often mentioned as a Maybeck building, but designed by John White, Maybeck's brother-in-law. Maybeck designed the first Hillside Club in 1903, but it was lost in the 1923 fire.

OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS, 1986 - 1987

President	Shirley Thomson
Vice President	Oliver Hamlin
Recording Secretary	Ruth Dyer
Corresponding Secretary	Carol Finney
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Membership	Lee Schell
Newsletter	Nancy Midwood
Newspaper	Peggy Craig
Oral History	Oliver Hamlin
Potluck (Annual Meeting)	Richard Johnson
Program	Elizabeth Johnston
Publicity	Sandy Kimball
Publications	Ruth Dyer



JANUARY BOARD MEETING

The Lafayette Historical Society board meeting will be held on Tuesday, January 13, 7:30 pm, at Carol Finney's home, 3239 Camino Colorado. Society members are welcome to attend and participate in the affairs and projects of LHS. Please call Carol (283-5957) if you plan to attend.

SPECIAL MAILING OPPORTUNITY

Would you like to be notified of special programs? We will be happy to develop a special mailing list for those of you who would like to be kept abreast of historical events or classes sponsored by area groups or by the California Historical Society. If you would like to be on this mailing list, clip the coupon below and mail it, with \$1.00 to cover costs, to Lafayette Historical Society, Box 133, Lafayette, CA 94549.

☐ Yes, I would like to receive the special notifications. I enclose \$1 payable to the Lafayette Historical Society.

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FIRST CLASS MAIL

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Hank Shuster